

Counter-Hegemonic Networks and the Transformation of Global Climate Politics: Rethinking Movement-State Relations

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Abstract

Global financial and ecological crises have fueled the diffusion of ideas and discourses that challenge U.S. hegemony and global capitalism and supported the expansion of counter-hegemonic alliances between states and social movements. Social movements are calling for rights for Mother Earth and for the development of new measures of well-being, putting forward increasingly credible alternatives to the state-led, market-based approaches to reducing greenhouse gas emissions. This paper traces the social movement processes that have advanced ecological and social justice critiques of capitalist development. It explores how regional and global networks of states and movements have contributed to the growing political salience of new claims and discourses that respond to the ecological threats posed by global warming. These observations reveal how social movement challenges contribute to an expanding realm of global politics that transgresses the traditional boundaries of the inter-state arena, calling for adaptations to our theoretical frameworks for understanding global social change.

It hardly needs saying that recent years have seen new and dramatic evidence attesting to the reality of global warming and the severity of its impacts.¹ This has helped alter dominant discourses about climate change and create new openings for radical challenges to the status quo. Even conservative institutions that have been major promoters of fossil-fuel intensive development – such as the World Bank and consultancy firm Price Waterhouse Cooper – have recently put forth warnings that a failure to shift away from fossil fuel energy sources puts humanity “on a path to climate catastrophe” (Leahy 2013).

Despite the urgency, however, inter-state discussions about how to address climate change have continued to remain deadlocked over questions about differential state obligations to reduce greenhouse gas emissions as well as target levels and timeframes for such reductions. Market-based approaches are the preferred means for addressing the climate crisis in inter-state debates, and intergovernmental negotiations have centered on efforts to promote carbon markets and the so-called “REDD” initiative, or Reducing Emissions from Deforestation and Forest Degradation. The most recent talks at the Rio + 20 Conference stressed a “green economy” initiative to maintain production and growth-oriented economies using less ecologically destructive energy. Most experts on climate change argue that such approaches will do little to curb greenhouse gas emissions and certainly will not achieve the 50-85% levels

of reductions called for by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change.² Other critical analysts see market-based approaches as counter-productive, since they enable continued pollution and environmental destruction (Salleh 2012; Bond 2012).

While governments are polarized and paralyzed in the face of what is clearly a most critical and unyielding challenge for both humans and other living things, social movement actors have increasingly come together in unprecedented ways to offer alternative approaches to the climate crisis, demanding “system change not climate change” (see, e.g., Climate Justice Alignment 2013; Solón 2013; Bond 2012). They do so following decades of growth in the field of transnational social movement organizing, which has generated extensive transnational communication and exchange around environmental and other global issues and advanced new critical analyses of global problems and their possible solutions. Following years of growth and interaction in spaces such as the UN global conferences and more recently the World Social Forum process, transnational social movement networks have increasingly been coming together in multi-issue coalitions focusing on the systemic causes of multiple and interconnected global problems—that is, global capitalism and its logic of perpetual accumulation or growth.³ Such transnational convergence around radical, system-challenging analyses comes at a time when the dominant order is not only paralyzed but also vulnerable to (and indeed is already experiencing) both environmental collapse and a related crisis of legitimacy (Smith and Wiest 2012; Harvey 2009; Wallerstein 2009).

This paper analyzes the discourses and alternatives to the hegemony of global capitalism being put forward by transnational environmental justice movements, and it identifies the organizational and alliance structures that characterize these movements. What is important and perhaps unprecedented in this case is the coming together of new constellations of challengers to the dominant order as well as the uniting of both movement and state actors around demands for radical social change, if not for a fundamental transformation of the world economic and political system.

World-systems analysts are being joined by growing numbers of observers describing the current political moment as one of hegemonic decline, as the United States’ influence in international politics declines and as its economic strength wanes in relation to other world powers (Chase-Dunn et al. 2010a; Wallerstein 2002). Such periods in world history are times of uncertainty and instability, as new constellations of forces challenge the declining hegemon (Arrighi and Silver 1999; Amin 2006). The rise in recent years of what has been called the “pink tide” of elected leftist governments has been helped by and in turn has helped reinforce strong populist and progressive movements in Latin America (Chase-Dunn et al. 2010b; Santos 2006).

Leftist politicians in Latin America have increasingly challenged U.S. hegemony on multiple fronts, both by asserting their autonomy in economic and military policies, by strengthening regional alliances within Latin America and between Latin America and other regions, and by challenging neoliberal policies of the global financial institutions by, for instance, paying off their loans to these institutions and/or by limiting new loan agreements (Weisbrot 2010; de la Barra and Dello Buono 2009; Broad and Cavanagh 2008).

Left governments and parties in Brazil, Venezuela, and Bolivia in particular have been supportive of—and in the case of the Worker Party in Brazil essential to—the development of the World Social Forum (WSF) process, which has put forward an explicit critique of neoliberal globalization and advanced the potentially transformative idea that “another world is possible.” The WSFs have routinely gathered many thousands of activists and organizations in global, regional, national and local social forums. These gatherings are seen as an ongoing dialogue, a world “process” that helps forge networks and analyses across both space and time, and ideas and discourses presented in these spaces travel readily through transnational networks and spaces of exchange that are both virtual and physical. This fosters cross-national exchange that has contributed to a world-systemic analysis and critique of globalized capitalism while advancing shared histories and identities among participants in the process (Blau and Karides 2008; Karides and Poniah 2008; Santos 2006; Smith et al. 2011; Smith and Karides et al. 2007).

The leftist regimes of Latin America, their domestic popular bases, and the global justice-oriented social movements that have been uniting around and strengthened by the World Social Forum process should thus be seen as an emergent counter-hegemonic alliance that challenges the dominant system. Within this broad counter-hegemonic alliance is a growing chorus of anti-systemic forces wanting not just an end to U.S. hegemony but a new world-system altogether. Moreover, as these forces resist US and capitalist hegemony they help develop new frames, consciousness, and identities that advance anti-systemic movements. Practices and discourses within these movements suggest that people’s participation in global politics and networks supports the development of what McMichael calls “movement learning networks” that support more radicalized analyses demanding system transformation rather than reformist responses (McMichael 2008). This process, I argue, is transforming the global political order itself by mobilizing new transnational actors and subjects and by transforming state actors and discourses.

Drawing from the work of Antonio Gramsci, we might view contemporary climate justice activism as representing a “war of position” that seeks to change conceptual frameworks and priorities rather than a “war of maneuver” that seeks to seize existing sources of power

(Gramsci 1971). Global level social movement politics is increasingly engaged in work that lies outside the discursive and policy frameworks of the inter-state system, and it is generating alternatives that are firmly anchored in social movement analyses and networks. Moreover, recent decades have cultivated widespread skepticism of conventional “NGO” politics that has fostered healthy critical debates in many diverse civil society circles, including the WSF process. This shared experience of inter-state politics and cooptation has helped increase the resonance of the more radical alternatives being put forth by movements.

In his analysis of Gramsci’s theoretical contributions, Eric Hobsbawm observed “the basic problem of the revolution is how to make a hitherto subaltern class capable of hegemony, believe in itself as a potential ruling class and be credible as such to other classes” (2011:324). If hegemony is the exercise of intellectual and moral leadership by a dominant group, then we should look to the ways subaltern groups are shaping discourses, values, and modes of thought. Even suggesting that alternatives to the dominant order are possible and feasible undermines the legitimacy and hegemony of dominant groups. To the extent that existing power structures remain powerless to address increasingly urgent financial and ecological crises, their hegemony is further eroded and must rely on increased coercion to survive. But coercion undercuts legitimacy and thus weakens hegemony further. This expands openings for a ‘globalization from below’ that may be gradually transforming the dominant social and political order.

The war of position being advanced by climate justice activism has generated ideas that are gaining adherence of states and a larger public. This is due to the growth since the 1990s of critical activist networks linked to the global justice movement and more recently to the surge of “Arab Spring” and Occupy/Indignados protests against austerity and repressive governments. These movements have generated more frequent and intensified interactions among different social actors and their networks, creating openings for the diffusion of critical analyses and discourses that have been nurtured in social movement networks to a wider audience (see, e.g. Klandermans 1992). These openings can, in turn, alter the space in which a variety of oppressed groups can resist. In particular, they enable more marginalized and exploited groups to enter the debates. Thus, it is in the realm of climate politics that we see significant leadership and vision being offered by those most oppressed by globalized capitalism, indigenous peoples.

In what follows I describe some of the key actors and discourses that have helped orient radical global climate politics and that are beginning to realize broader influence in both policy arenas and in the public debates. Specifically, the movement has generated analyses that call for a rethinking of anthropocentric assumptions of the world-system and for the rights of Mother

Earth. As a corollary to this idea that humans belong to the Earth and not vice-versa, movements also offer an alternative to the long-critiqued growth imperative of global capitalism, calling for a measure of progress that is based on well-being rather than perpetual accumulation. It is noteworthy that we see simultaneously a growing amount of movement work that takes place completely outside the inter-state political arena, cultivating analyses and identities that are autonomous and independent of states and institutionalized policy frameworks. At the same time, substantial segments of these movement networks are engaged with the inter-state order, finding allies in a growing number of states that have been systematically excluded from positions of leadership and from the benefits of the existing world-system. As the limits of the capitalist order become increasingly apparent, the risks of abandoning this system are reduced, while the potential advantages of leadership in the search for viable alternatives become more salient. Thus, counter-hegemonic alliances and their anti-systemic elements may be gaining momentum in the war of position to shift climate debates in directions that can actually reduce the significant threats humanity faces from global warming.

Climate Justice Activism and the World Social Forums

Contemporary climate justice activism is situated in a context of heightened social movement activity around a variety of claims, many of which are linked to an explicit critique of globalized capitalism. In this context, we are seeing greater convergence among activists and groups across what in the past were treated as distinct issue areas (Smith and Wiest 2012; Vasi 2005). Contributing to this convergence among movements and analyses is the proliferation of technologies that facilitate communication across national borders and organizational technologies that help connect global analyses with local action and otherwise advance the work of translation across diverse people and groups. Expanding numbers of transnational networks and organizations have created sustained opportunities for social movement actors to engage with and learn from each other over time, contributing to new and more complex analyses and shared understandings that would be impossible without such exchanges (della Porta 2007; Moghadam 2012; Rothman and Oliver 1999). Significantly, opportunities for social movement actors to convene outside spaces defined by states have increased as a result of the proliferation of activist networks and organizing projects. This is a contrast to the global politics of the 1990s, where the most significant transnational civil society/ social movement engagement took place alongside UN global conferences (Smith and Wiest 2012; Pianta and Silva 2003; Friedman et al. 2006).

The World Social Forum in particular has played an important role in creating autonomous movement spaces for cross-national, cross-movement, cross-class, and other intersectional exchanges and in building knowledge relevant to expanding radical democratic participation in global politics. Since its creation in 2001, the WSF *process* is a deliberate attempt to help organizers and activists develop a shared analysis of globalized capitalism while also supporting the development of networks and organizing capacities to help movements build power and resist systemic forms of oppression (della Porta and Rucht 2013; Santos 2006; Sen 2007; Sen and Waterman 2009; Smith, Byrd, Reese, and Smythe 2011). In light of this contribution, the WSF can be seen as an important site for the articulation and engagement of a social movement ‘war of position’ against capitalism. Indeed, activists working in the spaces of the social forums have spoken frequently of the need to transform culture, alter paradigms, and even to “build another hegemony against neoliberalism” (Group of Reflection and Support to the WSF Process 2013:2).⁴ The forum’s “evangelical search for dialogue” (della Porta 2005:186) has made it a highly dynamic and productive space for the development of ideas about alternatives to global capitalism, for experiments in global democracy, and for building a new “mental infrastructure” (Group of Reflection and Support to the WSF Process 2013:3) to challenge the “dictatorship of realism” (Massiah 2012) in the larger culture and to support a fundamentally different world-system (della Porta, Andretta, Mosca, and Reiter 2006; Doerr 2009; Grzybowski 2006; Pleyers 2011).

As activists come together in spaces like the social forums to build stronger alliances and find ways to more effectively achieve their aims, they cultivate and advance new, anti-systemic analyses that amplify values, cultural practices, and priorities distinct from those of capitalist hegemony, generating what McMichael calls an “alternative ontology.” Alternative ontologies make what is “virtually unthinkable” in dominant capitalist narratives into viable political projects (McMichael 2008:44). By bringing together movement actors from diverse social and geographic locations, and especially by privileging groups that have been most marginalized by the global capitalist system, the social forums have helped advance and project anti-capitalist movement’s war of position by foregrounding analyses emerging from the most marginalized and exploited groups and movements, whose experience of the contradictions of capitalism are both more extensive and blatant. For instance, activists in *La Via Campesina* have used the World Social Forums to disseminate the idea of “food sovereignty” as a radical response to the dominant, market-oriented discourses surrounding policy debates about food and hunger (Martínez-Torres and Rosset 2008; McMichael 2008).

The 2009 WSF in Belém, Brazil proved a particularly important time for the introduction or reinforcement of the movement's alternative ontology and its basis in indigenous ways of thinking. Organizers acknowledged and highlighted the region's rich indigenous traditions and their contributions. A thematic focus on the "civilizational crisis" represented by the global financial collapse of the previous fall encouraged the exploration of alternative ways of being and organizing social life that are common to many indigenous cultures. As WSF organizers describe it:

[W]e were also consolidating, especially after 2009, a view that the alternatives we are seeking must have a socio-environmental feature, and have to be based on real democratic processes regarding to the economic sphere (breaking up finances' dictatorship and the affirmation of a common management), and politics (which means wide popular participation, social control of governments, independence of market forces and new institutional forms to organize political participation). It is also necessary to question the relationship established between society and nature in the modern world, a core dimension of the current crisis of civilization (this means questioning the productivism and developmentalism still dominant and recover the contributions of indigenous peoples). The deepening of this agenda highlights the cultural, civilization and ideological dimension intrinsic to the changes we want to promote. (Group of Reflection and Support to the WSF Process 2013:4)

Following the WSF in Belém, there was a noticeable convergence in the discourses and focus of movement groups. Given the thinking outlined in the above quote, it should not be surprising that we are seeing movement convergence around ideas that draw from the knowledge and cultures of indigenous peoples. One idea from indigenous traditions that has gained popularity in movement discourse following the Belém WSF is the notion of advocating for the Rights of Mother Earth as a way of protecting both the environment and the human rights of current and future generations. In addition, another indigenous tradition known as *buen vivir*, or living well, as an alternative to perpetual growth as an orienting principle for society became more widespread in activist discussions following this forum.

The introduction of these alternatives to Western, capitalist modes of thought challenge the hegemony of the dominant order at a time when major crises help make more blatant the fundamental contradictions inherent in the capitalist world-system. To the extent that these ideas resonate within activist networks, they reinforce counter-hegemonic analyses and identities in global climate justice and related movements. The infusion of new groups and tactics into the arena of climate politics —largely as a result of the surge of global justice activism in the late 1990s and early 2000s—thus helped transform and radicalize global climate

debates (Hadden 2011; Reitan and Gibson 2012). Martin and Wilmer observe in these developments a distinctive shift in the mode of progression of norms in the international system:

The path of normative conflict and norm transmission instigated by indigenous activism is not a case where norms arising from international consensus are diffused 'downward' into domestic state environments as it is with issues involving human rights and humanitarian intervention...Instead, indigenous rights and the norms on which they rest arise from the "bottom" and are asserted "upward" in order to mobilize an international consensus, which in turn can be marshaled in support of indigenous peoples against state and transnational power. (2008: 584)

This analysis helps make sense of the ways indigenous people's movements are engaging with and seeing their claims and movements supported by the World Social Forum process. While such engagement has been difficult and often fraught with conflict, it is clear that activists in both indigenous and especially non-indigenous activists are learning from their joint struggle and committed to continuing this effort (Becker and Koda 2011; Conway 2012; Guerrero 2008). The widening discussions of ideas such as *buen vivir* and rights of Mother Earth help expose a larger public to modes of thinking that fundamentally challenge capitalist hegemony and encourage the larger society to question dominant historical narratives and assumptions as it struggles to address the most serious threats this society has ever faced.

Political Salience of Anti-Systemic Discourses in Social Movements

Wendy Wong (2012) develops the concept of political salience to evaluate the impacts of social movement actors on international politics. Examining transnational human rights advocacy, she argues that groups advocating for a particular claim or right may ultimately seek changes in specific laws and state practices, but to achieve this they must focus social movement discourses on a particular claim and build cooperative networks to reinforce it (pp. 158, 181). Enhancing the political salience of specific ideas, then, involves building movement collaboration and strengthening their networks of ties to influential political actors. To demonstrate the above idea that contemporary social movements are advancing an effort to establish a new hegemony that counters the anthropocentrism and market mentality of capitalist hegemony, I discuss examples of how notions of rights for Mother Earth and *buen vivir* are spreading among social movement groups, particularly but not exclusively those active in the WSF process.

Grassroots Global Justice Alliance is an important coalition of grassroots (locally based) activist groups working largely in low-income communities and with people of color across the United States. The GGJ Alliance was formed to help bring these groups and their constituencies into greater contact with movements in other parts of the world and more specifically to help them engage with the World Social Forum process. GGJ educates members about movements taking place in other countries and how these connect with struggles in member communities. It also helps educate and send delegations of members to the World Social Forums and has played an essential role in the US Social Forum process. Over time, it has shifted its emphasis and framing of global priorities to reflect its members and their work in global forums. Thus, while GGJ began with a mobilizing frame that was largely a global justice/anti-neoliberalism frame, its work more recently has focused on the need for “climate justice,” a frame which connects a critical analysis of global capitalism with demands for social and environmental protection. To advance this agenda, the group is increasingly using language that reinforces the idea of rights for Mother Earth.

At the US Social Forum in 2010, GGJ helped launch the Climate Justice Alignment (CJA) process, an initiative of over 30 organizations, including, significantly, GGJ member organization and member of the US Social Forum’s National Planning Committee, Indigenous Environmental Network. Responding to the urgent survival needs of many of its affiliates, the Climate Justice Alignment is calling for a “just transition” to an ecologically sustainable economy. According to the group’s website:

We must immediately begin to transition out of the Extreme Energy economy – an economy dependent on fossil fuels, incineration, agrofuels, nuclear energy and other risky industries causing ecological disruption, public health crises and economic impoverishment due to their industrialized extraction, production, pollution and waste practices. But to do this we must create new jobs and a safety net for workers who will transition out of those specific industries as well as the broader communities impacted by extreme energy. The Just Transition Campaign addresses both the need to shut down Extreme Energy as well as put in place new systems for truly sustainable work and livelihoods in frontline communities. These new sources of livelihood include recycling plants, local food production, ecological remediation, community owned energy systems, and more. We envision that these *new systems will serve as the seeds for a new economy based on local self-determination, resilience, and harmony with the Earth.*⁵ (emphasis added)

Thus, there is an explicit recognition that the network is advancing a distinct economic order governed by different social and ecological principles. Following the emergence of the Idle No More uprising in Canada, the Climate Justice Alignment offered the following solidarity

statement, indicating how indigenous modes of thought are being internalized in the coalition's discourses and in its portrayal of its positions to a larger public:

[W]e support the grassroots leadership of all Indigenous nations opposing colonial governments and the corporate empires they serve. ... We recognize and respect the critical role of traditional Indigenous knowledge in the defense of Mother Earth, for building community resilience. Idle No More provides us all an opportunity to re-think social, political and economic relations to include environmental, spiritual, and communitarian values. Such values can guide our movements to overcome climate change, poverty, war and oppression, and help us build local living economies with community-led solutions.⁶

Pairing this quote with the one above from the Group of Reflection and Support of the WSF, we see some striking parallels in the analysis being put forward. However, while the first quote appears in a document whose circulation is limited largely to a more globally attentive constituency of scholars and activists, the latter comes from an organization working with very local groups such as the East Michigan Environmental Action Coalition and the Black Mesa Water Coalition. Thus, we see how the ideas being articulated in the WSF process are diffusing through the various networks that converge in its many local, national, and regional spaces. Because the Social Forums have from their very inception encouraged ongoing work to expand connections between global analysis and local political engagement, the example of GGJ's work is unlikely to be unique.

Other groups that have formed out of discussions at World Social Forums and at global conferences on climate change such as those discussed below are also working to enhance the resonance of the claim that we need to recognize rights of nature if we are to realize any of the basic human rights that are the foundation of the existing system's legitimacy. For instance, the Global Alliance for the Rights of Nature and the Pachamama Alliance have formed to advance a formal declaration of the rights of Mother Earth. And groups like the Community Environmental Legal Defense Fund have been working to create and reinforce laws that protect both local environments and democracy. ELDF both participates in the global initiatives to advance international recognition of the rights of nature and at the same time helps educate community leaders and public officials to think about the law in new ways. Through the work of ELDF and others, people in cities like Pittsburgh have been learning that laws to protect the rights of nature can also reinforce democracy against corporate influence (Margil and Price 2010). Also, groups like the Move to Amend Coalition,⁷ have helped connect demands for the legal recognition of rights of nature with attempts to curb corporations' legal rights.⁸

Reinforcing the idea that a key to the problems our world-system faces is the fact that it operates in competition with nature and treats human society as independent of the natural world is another indigenous concept known as *buen vivir*, or good living. This term has also gained popularity in movement circles, especially since the 2009 World Social Forum. It has emerged from discussions in countries like Ecuador and Bolivia where new constitutions (adopted in 2008 and 2009, respectively) have institutionalized the rights of Nature and guaranteed citizens the right to *buen vivir*. The term's origin in indigenous traditions is seen in the definition provided on the website of the Pachamama Alliance, which was named above:

An ancient Quechua word, *sumak kawsay* means “good living” or the “good life,” and means more than our version of *la buena vida*. Often when we hear this, we may think of easy living, and a carefree yet connected lifestyle, but *sumak kawsay* is much deeper than this. Throughout South America, it is a way of living in harmony within communities, ourselves, and most importantly, nature.⁹

The political salience of this notion of *buen vivir* as a standard around which people might agree to organize an alternative world-system is apparent in the frequency with which this term has been used in social movement arenas since the 2009 World Social Forum. All major gatherings of the WSF process since the Belém Social Forum—including world and thematic forums and those organized at regional levels—make reference to the idea, often in their main organizing frameworks (see, e.g., Legatis 2011). In addition, a search of online references to these terms showed dramatic increases in their use following the Belém Social Forum. More than 90% of all website mentions of the terms *buen vivir* or rights of Mother Earth/rights of nature were made after 2007. And while mainstream news sources were less likely to make specific mention of these terms, virtually all such mentions we found appeared during and especially after 2008.¹⁰

Since it is based in ancient cultural traditions, what is important to account for is why the notion of *buen vivir* has only recently started to become more salient in political discourse. Looking at official debates surrounding the measurement of progress, we do find some earlier attempts to challenge capitalism's emphasis on growth as the main marker of progress. For instance, the kingdom of Bhutan has advanced its own measure of “gross national happiness” in its domestic policies, and has been promoting the idea internationally. Interestingly, in April 2012—following the introduction of the idea of *buen vivir* in the World Social Forums and its widening use in movement and public discourse-- the United Nations convened a High Level Meeting on “Happiness and Well-Being: Defining a New Economic Paradigm.”¹¹ The United Nations itself challenged the hegemony of GNP as a measure of progress and well-being when it launched the Human Development Index in 1990. Since 1990 the annual Human

Development Reports have documented the frequent discrepancies between a country's measures of monetary wealth and the well-being of its people. While this index certainly contributed to critical debates about global capitalism, it failed to gain the kind of attention in movement circles that we now see with *buen vivir*. Finally, the most recent official challenge to GNP's hegemony as an indicator of progress is the work of former chief economist of the World Bank and nobel laureate Joseph Stiglitz, who with another nobel laureate Amartya Sen and French economist Jean-Paul Fitoussi published the book, *Mis-measuring our Lives: Why GDP Doesn't Add Up* (2010). The book was the result of a study commissioned by French President Nicolas Sarkozy in the wake of the global financial crisis. I would argue that it is the combination of the interconnected realities of deep, systemic crisis in the capitalist world-system and the surge of transnational social movement activism for fundamental change that accounts for the contemporary political salience of *buen vivir* as a policy orientation.

Social movement actors have responded to the climate crisis by putting forward new concepts aimed at helping focus diverse movements on common understandings of preferred alternatives to capitalist hegemony. The ideas of the rights of Mother Earth and *buen vivir* require a very different understanding of progress and development and a break from the existing system of globalized capitalism, yet they leave room for those embracing them to imagine diverse possibilities for such an alternative system. This possibility for unity in diversity clearly helps account for their resonance in activist networks. What distinguishes this trajectory of ideas political salience from earlier periods, however, is that these terms have been generated from below and diffused upward and outward rather than spreading from inter-governmental discourses into movements, as was more characteristic in previous periods.¹² This is not to say that movement discourses have not influenced previous inter-state discussions—they certainly have. But often when movements have helped raise problems to policy agendas, the solutions posed tend to reflect the interests of corporations and political elites. Thus, concern for the environment led to calls for “sustainable development,” the problem of hunger generated calls for “food security,” and alarm over the impacts of wars on civilian population led to discussion of “human security.” None of these frames challenge the hegemony global capitalism. In contrast, notions of rights for Mother Earth and *buen vivir* challenge the basic logic of capitalist accumulation and thus reflect an emerging new hegemony being advanced by movements around the world. Significantly, the evidence of a convergence of different global actors around these ideas for re-orienting social life extends into the realm of inter-state politics as well.

Counter-Hegemonic Climate Politics in the Inter-State System

While we see convergence among social movement actors around the transformative ideas of rights of nature and *buen vivir*, the emergence of a new hegemony would require that at least some more powerful actors accept if not embrace these ideas. Thus, changes in the relations of civil society to the inter-state system are needed to advance the counter-hegemonic and anti-systemic potential of contemporary climate change politics.¹³ Below I discuss the ways social movement engagement with the UN Climate Conferences has changed in response to the rise of the global justice movement, growing evidence of the effects of climate change, and persistent paralysis in inter-state climate negotiations. This has helped generate greater coherence in the ideas and networks of groups advancing alternatives to the dominant intergovernmental agendas on climate change. Building on this development was the World People's Conference on Climate Change and the Rights of Mother Earth, introduced by Bolivia in the wake of the failed 2009 inter-state climate talks as a new approach to addressing this urgent global problem.

Jennifer Hadden's work (Hadden 2011) shows how activist "spillover" from the global justice movement disrupted the routines of inter-state climate negotiations by bringing a more diverse set of organizations with more confrontational political orientations into the process. Between 2008 and 2009, the number of nongovernmental groups registered to participate in the official conference grew by 50%.¹⁴ Nearly half of these new organizations were working on issues other than just the environment, including development, justice, youth, indigenous and women's rights. In addition to expanding the framing of the climate issue beyond the environment, the new organizations and networks becoming involved in this area brought new strategies and tactics, largely drawing from the more confrontational approaches and identities of the global justice movement. The "Climate Justice Network" formed in 2007 at the close of the COP 13 in Bali, in response to activists' frustrations with the course of international climate negotiations and the limitations of existing NGO strategies in this arena.¹⁵ CJN also helped put forth a more radical analysis of the climate debate than its rival network, the Climate Action Network.

Reflecting an increased convergence between global climate politics and the global justice movement, in January 2012, the World Social Forum convened, in Porto Alegre, Brazil, a thematic social forum on the climate crisis to provide space for participating groups to develop their analyses and strategies for the Rio+20 global climate conference later that year. Thus the WSF helped provide space for social movements to gather outside the boundaries defined by

states to articulate their own vision of an alternative world order and the steps necessary for achieving that vision. As the call for participants in the WSF Thematic forum stated:

Now – facing this opportunity presented by the Peoples' Summit of the Rio +20 for Social and Environmental Justice - we believe the WSF process must offer its contribution to boost the preparation of the People's Summit and to help to settle its agenda, by organizing a Thematic Social Forum in Porto Alegre ... to discuss the crisis and the emergency policies to be taken in order to ensure the survival and well-being of hundreds of millions of people. This forum will explore the ways to affirm *alternative paradigms opposed to industrial, productivist and consumerist civilization, and the agenda of social transformation that corresponds to it*. A forum to strengthen the connections between the actors and actresses committed to this agenda, to mobilize them for action, encourage their convergence and support their effective participation in the Peoples' Summit. (Group of Reflection and Support to the WSF Process and Gaúcho Organizing Committee 2011:7, emphasis added)

In contrast, during the 1990s, transnational gatherings of civil society actors tended to be during UN global conferences, and thus their timing, location, rules of access, and agendas were shaped by states rather than movements themselves.

Not surprisingly, when movements can define and shape their own spaces of convergence, new kinds of proposals have emerged. Most notably, these proposals aren't framed in relation to those being debated in official conferences, but rather in reference to the analyses and perceptions of people themselves. The statement of the organizing committee of the WSF Thematic forum on climate further demonstrates the recognition by social movement actors of the need to create autonomous spaces for deliberation of alternatives to the agendas and policies advanced by states:

Taking into account the actions of hegemonic actors of the international system and the mediocrity of the international agreements negotiated in recent years, their false solutions and the neglect of the principles already agreed Rio92, we understand that we shall not give up to influence their actions, [nor should we have illusions that] it can trigger a virtuous cycle of negotiations and significant commitments to confront the serious problems that both humanity and the planet are facing. We understand the necessary agenda for democratic global governance supposes the ending of the current condition where multilateral spaces are captured by the corporate world. A change may emerge only from the action of various social actors, networks, non-governmental organizations and social movements in different areas of action.... *We need to build a new paradigm of social, economic and political organization...* (Group of Reflection and Support to the WSF Process and Gaúcho Organizing Committee 2011:6, emphasis added)

The final dialogue platform of the thematic WSF stressed the need to defend the common goods of humankind from threats caused by commodification and privatization. This

demand highlighted the inadequacies of the official negotiations, which centered on the development of a “green economy” and advance of carbon markets in response to climate change. The document also stressed the need to move from an anthropocentric to a biocentric civilization based on notions of Earth rights, putting forward concrete proposals aimed at achieving this end. New ethics surrounding consumption and production, including the aim of “food sovereignty” and deepened democracy, were also common themes, linked explicitly to the goal of advancing *buen vivir* (Santos 2012; World Social Forum 2012). Interestingly, while the social forum participants were explicit in calling for a new paradigm, they remain seriously engaged in thinking about ways of engaging existing institutions in order to advance such a vision. For instance a number of proposals call for specific changes to the operation of the United Nations to make it more democratic and responsive to both less powerful states and civil society networks.

This consolidation of networks of more radicalized civil society groups thus helps advance more critical discussions of the market-oriented proposals being advanced in official debates. It also creates space for more critical reflection on the ways civil society actors had been engaging inter-state climate politics, encouraging participants in more reformist groups and networks to move towards more radicalized analyses and demands. As one environmental activist with Friends of the Earth reported after the Rio + 20 meeting in June of 2012,

For once all popular movements whether being indigenous peoples, rural former black slave minorities, women, environmentalists, trade unions, peasants, urban reformers, solidarity economy and anti-debt movements and you name it worked on equal terms from the South and the North *at a historic global event for a radically different general politics to the dominant development model*. It moved all the parallel activities in Rio de Janeiro to better positions. It contributed to stop the eradicating of the best principles from the Rio Conference 1992. *It made the stake holder NGOs more radical which can be seen in such a statement as that of Oxfam saying that the most positive activity in Rio was the People’s Summit*. (Björk 2012, emphasis added)

Significantly, while the inter-state arena has proved itself incapable of addressing the very real catastrophe of global climate change, social movements and their allies are not waiting for some new breakthrough in this arena, but rather are moving outside the inter-state deadlock to articulate and build popular support for a radically different approach to the climate change crisis. At this historical moment, such calls are gaining more attention from state and civil society actors that have traditionally been embedded in conventional inter-state politics.

Within this radicalized and crisis-ridden context, in 2009, the UN General Assembly declared April 22nd International Mother Earth Day, supporting the resolution proposed and

promoted by Bolivia. Supposedly a herald of a new century of the Earth's rights – where the 20th century was that of human rights – the resolution was rather quickly seen as an empty gesture. The December 2009 Copenhagen Climate Conference (COP 15) was widely deemed a failure, as the United States and other major greenhouse gas emitters and corporate lobbyists obstructed efforts for an agreement on reductions of greenhouse gas emissions, despite growing evidence of the effects of climate change.¹⁶ In response to the persistent failures of the inter-state arena to generate an agreement, leftist Bolivian president Evo Morales¹⁷ called for a global meeting outside of the formal inter-state system, inviting governments, groups, and individuals from all over the world to meet for a “World People’s Summit on Climate Change and the Rights of Mother Earth.”¹⁸ Although initially planned by a national government, the Conference became – as was widely acknowledged and emphasized – civil society-organized. This hybrid, government and civil society initiative on a conflict of major global significance represents an important development in the war of position of social movements, since it shifts attention and energy away from the deadlocked inter-state arena, demonstrating and shaping alternative paths to addressing this urgent global problem. The Cochabamba Conference thus represents an attempt by both movements and counter-hegemonic states to unite behind an effort to end the inter-state stalemate caused by the United States and to explicitly acknowledge the links between climate change and the global capitalist system.

The Cochabamba Summit advanced movements’ war of position by putting forward an explicit *alternative or corrective to the UN* climate conference process. The Summit was referred to as an “alternative to the so-called Copenhagen Agreement” (Lander 2010), a “pole of subversion and response” (Estrada 2010), and even an “anti-UN summit” (*New Internationalist* 2010). As such, it challenged the idea that the United Nations is the only arena where serious discussions of international politics can happen. In addition, by introducing the idea that the Earth is an entity with legally defensible rights fundamentally challenges the legal basis of the modern inter-state system, which is grounded in territorial sovereignty and anthropocentrism. Finally, the Cochabamba Summit challenges states’ monopoly in global governance. Although the Cochabamba Agreement was to be read to the General Assembly (Conant 2010), it did not designate states or intergovernmental agencies as primarily responsible for its implementation. Rather, civil society was expected to be the lead agent implementing the Agreement, with or without states’ support.

This speaks to an important contribution of the Cochabamba Agreement to movements’ war of position. The fact that the Agreement *relies upon civil society rather than states* for its implementation recognizes the global political agency of civil society. By explicitly designating

itself a *political project* rather than a policy agenda, the Agreement emphasizes the work of movement-building over government leadership and action to solving the most pressing problem on the world agenda (Angeles 2011; Aguirre and Cooper 2010). This defies the privileged role of states in the international political arena, encourages popular organizing on this global initiative, and can (further) threaten basic legal notions of territorial sovereignty and autonomy.¹⁹ An important development from the Summit was the creation, in the fall of 2010, of a Global Alliance for the Rights of Nature, which was formed by an international meeting of groups that had been active in the Summit, and which has the explicit aim of advancing formal international recognition of the rights of “Pachamama.”²⁰ The Cochabamba Agreement contributes to this and other kinds of popular organizing by calling for a global referendum on climate issues:

it is essential to carry out a global referendum or popular consultation on climate change in which all are consulted regarding the following issues; the level of emission reductions on the part of developed countries and transnational corporations, financing to be offered by developed countries, the creation of an International Climate Justice Tribunal, the need for a Universal Declaration of the Rights of Mother Earth, and the need to change the current capitalist system. (PWCCC 2010)

The process of carrying out such a referendum would involve mass education and mobilization and would empower activists and groups with ideas and tools for sustained participation in international political initiatives, including those outside the realm of climate politics.

Beyond calling for a global popular referendum, the Agreement authorizes and challenges civil society to play a greater role in coordinating action and implementation, calling for “the building of a Global People’s Movement for Mother Earth.” Unlike the inter-state system which is its foil, this movement is “based on the principles of complementarity and respect for the diversity of origin and visions among its members, constituting a broad and democratic space for coordination and joint worldwide actions” (PWCCC 2010). While of course the building of such a movement is contingent upon the work of social movements themselves, the language offered by the Cochabamba Summit lends legitimacy and focus to this work in ways that contribute to movements’ “war of position.”

The Cochabamba Agreement is significant not only in bolstering the power of civil society, but it also advances counterhegemony by empowering less powerful states. It does so in two important ways. First, it advances the idea of a Global Climate Tribunal to allow states experiencing disproportionate effects of climate change to hold more powerful polluting states accountable for their contributions to global warming. Second, the Agreement explicitly calls for

recognition of the “ecological debts” advanced industrialized countries have to the countries of the global South as a result of their own industrialization. By legitimizing the claims of states outside the core, the Agreement helps advance a counter-hegemonic alliance between movements and some governments, altering the balance of power that favors the existing, highly unequal and undemocratic inter-state system. It also exposes the inconsistency between global norms of democracy and fairness and actual practices, highlighting the illegitimacy of existing arrangements and advancing the movement war of position.

The Cochabamba Agreement helps advance counter-hegemony and the war of position in the realm of consciousness as well. It challenges dominant modes of thought and discourse by putting forth a holistic perspective on relations among states, civil society, and the natural world. This contrasts with practices in official inter-state politics, which involve the compartmentalization of issues and governance practices into separate negotiation tracks and agencies. The Agreement does not simply address environmental practices and policies, but it both acknowledges and seeks to redress the larger problem of the anthropocentrism of states and international institutions. There is recognition in the document that humans’ limited understanding of the natural world – and thus their relationship to it – has prevented the development of policies that address the root causes of ecosystem degradation and resource depletion.

The Agreement thus calls for a radical reorientation of the basic philosophic orientations that undergird the dominant world-system. For instance, using language that parallels the World Social Forum Charter of Principles and other social movement discourse, the Conference in Cochabamba brought together critiques of patriarchy, capitalism, imperialism, militarism, and racism. Pointing out the interconnectedness of these multiple systems of exploitation, the Agreement states

the corporations and governments of the so-called “developed” countries, in complicity with a segment of the scientific community, have led us to discuss climate change as a problem limited to the rise in temperature without questioning the cause, which is the capitalist system (PWCCC 2010).

Here the document directly challenges the dominant discourses surrounding inter-state climate change negotiations, pointing explicitly to the idea that capitalism itself is fueling climate change. This contrasts the proposed solutions advanced in official arenas for market-based and technology-driven responses to climate change which aim for minimal emissions reductions and adaptation without addressing the systemic causes of climate change.

All of these components – the authorization of marginalized civil society actors, the privileging of the needs and interests of less powerful state actors, the challenging of anthropocentrism as a basis for human society, and the exposure of incompatibilities between the capitalist system and efforts to address climate change – make the World People's Conference on Climate Change and the Rights of Mother Earth indicative of the rise of an antisystemic challenge,²¹ which we view as both resulting from and contributing to the growth of transnational social movement power. What is particularly noteworthy of the Cochabamba document, in addition to its transformative discourse, is its specification of particular forms and models of action required to address the climate crisis – models which address a global policy matter by reaching far beyond conventional inter-state practices and, while encouraging new movement-state alliances, also authorize movements as new *agents* in global politics.

Not surprisingly, the Cochabamba agreement has been widely ignored by powerful states, and Bolivia's attempts to bring elements of the agreement to the UN General Assembly for debate have been thwarted by the U.S. and other major powers. Nevertheless, social movements have continued to focus their energies on the ideas and proposals of the Cochabamba Declaration, and the document appears to be an important source of focus and unity at a time when even those groups that have operated more in the mainstream of the inter-state process are abandoning hope that governments will adequately address the climate crisis.

Conclusion

We're currently witnessing a political moment of profound crisis and unprecedented popular mobilization around climate change. At a time of enhanced social movement capacity for transnational exchange and collaboration, we see movements converging around concrete alternatives to the dominant political and economic order. Examining global debates on climate change, I have documented how social movements have advanced new discourses and agendas outside of the international political framework that had once been the exclusive purview of states. This can be seen as movement advances in a war of position against global capitalist hegemony. Significantly, this struggle for a new hegemony has emerged from an increasingly vibrant arena of transnational politics beyond the control of states even as it engages with the inter-state system.

Endnotes*

¹ For dramatic visual evidence of global warming seen in time-lapse photography, see <http://www.chasingice.com/>

² The recommended 50-85% emissions reductions, if achieved by 2050, would produce the lowest anticipated change in average temperature of 2.0-2.4 degrees Centigrade. (Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, [Climate Change 2007: Synthesis Report](#), Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, November 2007, page 67).

³ For instance, the Climate Justice Alignment helped sponsor a “Climate Justice Space” at the 2013 World Social Forum which reflects an innovation in the use of the WSFs to encourage groups to develop concrete strategies and projects to address the urgent threats of climate change. Their call to participation stresses the aim of generating concerted action to address climate change, asking “how do we go beyond our usual strategies and see how we can win concrete victories on the ground by working together, across sectors, across movements, old and new, linking social struggles with environmental struggles?” For details, see: <http://climatespace2013.wordpress.com/>

⁴ My discussions of the World Social Forum process draw extensively from my observant participation in the WSF process at several world-level forums as well as regional, local and national level forums in Europe and North America. Much of this work has been done in my role as a delegate to and organizer in the US Social Forum’s National Planning Committee, where I have served since the spring of 2008.

⁵ <http://ggjalliance.org/JustTransitionCampaign>

⁶ <http://ggjalliance.org/IdleNoMoreSolidarity>

⁷ Significantly, the Move to Amend Coalition is also a US Social Forum National Planning Committee member.

⁸ For instance, groups participating in Move to Amend’s work in Pittsburgh hosted a workshop with CELDF to discuss strategies for strengthening community influence on decisions regarding land use and regulation of the fracking industry (<http://environmentaljusticetmc.blogspot.com/2013/02/new-2nd-community-rights-workshop-march.html>; <http://www.celdf.org/section.php?id=220>).

⁹ <http://www.pachamama.org/sumak-kawsay>

¹⁰ A general web search of *buen vivir* yielded 390,800 hits where a publication date could be determined, and 21,800 (5.6%) of those were prior to 2008. “Rights of nature” generated 35,650 hits, 10.2% of which were from prior to 2008. “Rights of Mother Earth” saw significantly fewer mentions but the same pattern of 2.7% of mentions before 2008. Virtually all mentions of these terms were movement sources. The Belem Social Forum took place in January of 2009, and we included 2008 in our search for these terms, since the planning of this social forum is expected to have begun to generate increased use of these ideas/terms.

¹¹ UN News Center. 2012. “Ban: new economic paradigm needed, including social and environmental progress.” *UN News Center*. At: <http://www.un.org/apps/news/story.asp?NewsID=41685#.UU1IHfoUs>: United Nations.

¹² Wong’s (2012) research reinforces this idea that social movement strategies are shifting towards more pro-active, agenda-promoting activities aimed at defining new international norms and strengthening movement capacities for holding states accountable to these norms.

¹³ Counter-hegemony refers to challenges to the dominance of US hegemony in the current world-system, but it does not necessarily require a shift to a new type of world-system. New hegemonic forces can emerge within the existing capitalist system. Anti-systemic forces, in contrast, advance a completely different world-system that is not based on the logic of accumulation that drives the capitalist world-system.

¹⁴ The numbers grew from 874 to 1318 organizations in this time period (Hadden 2011:11).

¹⁵ <http://www.climate-justice-now.org/about-cjn/history/>. Accessed October 31, 2012.

¹⁶ In its 2007/8 *Human Development Report*, the UN Development Programme argued that the existing calls for 50% cuts in greenhouse gas emissions over the next ten years if the world is to avoid the worst effects of climate change.

¹⁷ Morales is widely respected among transnational activists for his leadership on global climate change, despite the fact that as a head of state, he has backed national policies that are inconsistent with his international environmental leadership (see, e.g., Aguirre and Cooper 2010). His positions in regard to the rights of Mother Earth shifted from his earlier position in internal political debates with political rival, Felipe Quishpe’s MIP movement, which had advanced such rights as part of its platform against Morales’s party Martin, Pamela and Franke Wilmer. 2008. “Transnational Normative Struggles and Globalization: The

Case of Indigenous Peoples in Bolivia and Ecuador." *Globalizations* 5:583-598.. This suggests that movements both within and outside Bolivia are influential in advancing this idea.

¹⁸ The reference to this meeting as a "summit" is significant, since in the United Nations such a reference designates that heads of state will be in attendance, indicating the meeting's salience on government agendas. While states may choose to send a lower-level delegate to a summit, they do so at the risk of offending other states whose delegates outrank theirs.

¹⁹ Such legal notions have been increasingly challenged by globalization. For instance, the UN's recognition of the "Responsibility to Protect" explicitly authorizes the international community to intervene in states' domestic affairs in situations where major human rights violations are present.

²⁰ A report of the Community Environmental Legal Defense Fund outlines the strategy of the campaign, which seeks to use legal mechanisms and precedents to "reproduce this concept virally through the world, *invading systems of thought and juridical systems*. The Global Alliance will definitely become a key actor to promote actions and help the implementation of Rights for Nature in Ecuador and other countries around the world that follow this good example" (<http://www.celdf.org/global-alliance-for-rights-of-nature-formed-from-historic-international-gathering-in-ecuador-1>, emphasis added) (Community Environmental Legal Defense Fund, 2010).

²¹ Turner makes a similar argument, and sees the Cochabamba Agreement's radicalism in its "(1) a class analysis of climate change, (2) successful direct action against its corporate perpetrators, and (3) burgeoning global organization from below" (2010:20).

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